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SUBJECT: HEART OF BORNEO: UPDATE ON BRUNEIAN VIEWS

REF: BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 361

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Government of Brunei (GOB) remains solidly behind the Heart of Borneo (HOB) project, a WWF initiative that aims to establish a tropical forest conservation area consisting of 85,000 square miles of contiguous protected zones across the three countries that share the world's third biggest island. The GOB is prepared to place 61.3 percent of Brunei's land area under HOB protection, but only if Malaysia, Indonesia, and their local governments on Borneo establish and enforce their own protection zones. The Bruneians have become more optimistic that the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak will do so, but remain concerned about Indonesian provincial authorities given their lack of resources and other priorities. The GOB has offered its comments on an Indonesian draft of a leaders declaration establishing the HOB and hopes it will be issued at the December ASEAN Summit; it has proposed establishment of a rotating HOB Secretariat once the declaration is issued, and offered to serve as initial host country. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador met GOB Deputy Minister of Industry and Primary Resources Dato Hamdillah on September 27 to get an update on GOB support for the HOB. Hamdillah confirmed that Brunei remains solidly behind the initiative. Against the backdrop of the seasonal "haze" that has dropped visibility in some parts of Brunei to under two miles -- actually smoke from land-clearing forest fires, primarily in the Indonesian portion of Borneo -- Hamdillah argued that this was a national security issue for the GOB, since developments within the HOB area had a direct impact on the sources of Brunei's fresh water and on its air quality.

¶3. (U) Hamdillah briefed the Ambassador on the results of an HOB national workshop held in Brunei earlier this year under the sponsorship of the GOB, UK High Commission, Brunei Shell Petroleum and HSBC Bank. At the workshop, the GOB decided that it could place 61.3 percent of Brunei's total land area of 2,228 square miles under HOB protection: 267 square miles of national parks and protected forests, 557 square miles of production forest lying between these areas, plus another 541 square miles of rattan and bamboo plantations, logged-over forest, and peat swamp and coastal forests running down to the South China Sea coast in western Brunei. This was consistent with the National Forestry Policy of maintaining forest coverage over at least 55 percent of Brunei and the current level of approximately 70 percent forest coverage. Economic activities such as oil exploration and production could take place in parts of this area, but only under strict environmental guidelines.

¶4. (SBU) Hamdillah repeated his earlier assertion (reftel) that the GOB would not finalize its declaration of an HOB protection zone until the other participants -- Malaysia plus its states of Sabah

and Sarawak, and Indonesia and its province of East Kalimantan -- were ready to do the same. The HOB was a single ecosystem, and there was no point in Brunei trying to protect its small slice of it in isolation from the rest. Unlike his earlier view, however, Hamdillah now believed that Sabah and Sarawak were serious about putting into place the necessary legal protections and enforcement mechanisms. He was more concerned about Indonesia. Although there was growing support in Jakarta, provincial government officials had limited resources and other pressing problems such as the lack of economic development to address. Hamdillah had heard that the WWF representative in Jakarta might be leaving his post soon, and worried that the departure of this champion for HOB could further set back efforts to win Indonesian support.

15. (U) Hamdillah was focused on the issuance of a joint HOB Declaration by the leaders of the three countries who shared the island as the next necessary step toward turning the HOB vision into reality. He believed that only such a joint declaration could provide the political impetus needed at this stage of the HOB project. The Indonesian government had done a first draft of a declaration, the GOB had offered its edits at the workshop earlier this year, and Hamdillah hoped the Malaysian government would do the same at a national workshop it was hosting. The GOB would push for the final declaration to be signed at the ASEAN summit in December. The GOB had also proposed that once the Declaration was issued, an HOB Secretariat be established that would rotate between each of the three participating countries, but always on the island of Borneo itself. The GOB had offered to serve as the initial host nation.

16. (SBU) Asked what would be the GOB's biggest problem in implementing its HOB obligations, Hamdillah replied without hesitation "people." The staff members of GOB forestry and conservation agencies were not uniformly sold on the need for conservation, and those that were did not have the training they needed. Close supervision and additional training would be required if the HOB was to be a success.

17. (SBU) Hamdillah repeated his earlier expression of gratitude for the USG contribution of USDOLS 100 thousand to HOB, but shared his worry that certain of his (unnamed) counterparts from Malaysia and Indonesia were drawing the wrong conclusion from the USG contribution. He had heard grumbling that if USDOLS 100 thousand was all the world's only superpower saw fit to contribute to HOB, then it could not be a very high priority for Washington. Ambassador asked Hamdillah to stress to his counterparts that the importance of our contribution was not just the amount provided, but also the signal of USG interest and the ability of our contribution to leverage additional action by other donors.

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